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POP MUSIC

Disco 'accident' crashes charts

Gino Soccio likes to work 36 hours straight in recording studio.

By JUAN RODRIGUEZ
of The Gazette

"Three years ago," says Gino Soccio, "I would've been one of those guys wearing a 'Disco Sucks' T-shirt. I was just a session musician in town and I was into heavier music, such as the fusion of jazz, rock and classical.

"Then, almost by accident, I happened to be playing a keyboard track on a locally produced Kebekelectric album that had a disco hit, *Warclance*, which sold a lotta copies in the U.S.

"So I started thinking — what'd I do? What is this thing called disco? It was a whole new field opening up and I decided to get in there and chart new ground.

"I mean, why should I make music for 50 people when I can make it for 50 million?"

Today, the 23-year-old Montrealer is making millions dance. His hit single, *Dance to Dance / Dancer*, has been Number One on Billboard's disco sales charts for eight weeks.

"Nobody's done that before, not the Bee Gees, not Gloria Gaynor, nobody but me," enthuses Soccio, between gulps of coffee and cognac.

"Lookathis," he says, hauling out an Italian glossy photomagazine from his attache case. "Look at the job the Italians are doing on me." — Soccio is pictured in color with beautiful women and cars — "and that's just Italy. The whole world is going disco!"

It would be an understatement to say Gino Soccio is high on disco music. Talking about it, he gushes into rhapsodies. Tall, slim and wide-eyed, Soccio has the magic touch in the recording studio and it's making him feel good.

"Disco is more than just music," says Soccio. "It's a social movement. The best way I can explain that is to point to a place in Greenwich Village called the Paradise Garage. During the day it's an indoor parking lot, but from 6 p.m. 'til 8 in the morning, it's a giant disco.

"It doesn't have a liquor permit but you see 2,000 people dancing, shaking, moving, letting go through the night and into the morning. Why are these people doing this? There's something social going on there, it's like the Woodstock of disco.

"And I'm not joying you when I say it's spreading to epidemic proportions. It's positive music, it fills a demand for people who want to blow their minds dancing. You know, rock started out as dance music but it got heavier and lost the beat. You know, people are basically simple and they need something simple to relate to."

Gino says he feels a part of something very new, and he feels extra good when he hears his records played at home, which is Verdun. He began taking piano lessons at the age of 9 "because my parents thought it would kinda round out my education," he says with a wink. After attending the Conservatoire Vincent d'Indy and puttering about with philosophy at the Universite de Montreal, Soccio graduated to the subterranean world of the session musician.

> **"Disco is more than music it's a social movement"**

How did Gino come to learn the tricks of the disco trade?

"I hung out in a lot of discos. I didn't dance much, but I watched the people dance and I studied what turned them on. I got the feel of it. Disco is body music, physical music, its sole purpose is to keep people moving. So you use all the sound stimulants, all the mental effects to spur them on. For instance, in my *Dancer*, I've got the chorus singing a line, 'You never knew the power of your body', and it plants something in their minds and gets them thinking body.

"There's a certain intensity I always look for. You know, disco is African oriented, it's repetitious, it's hypnotic. People hear Sister Sledge sing 'We are family' over and over again and in their sweaty state they look at others and they feel power in their movement. I'll tell ya, it's the best thing to happen to society."

Disco is also putting Montreal on the music map. "It's behind New York, but ahead of everyone else." The city's disco scene — with more than 36 discotheques — is open to new sound ideas, an environment that's given Soccio the opportunity to explore.

"Disco today is where rock was at the time of Chuck Berry," he says. "And because disco is an acceptance of electronic musical technology, there's still a lot to discover."

There's little doubt that Soccio has rocketed into the vanguard of the genre. His album, *Outline*, was the first to be released on the disco-only custom label, RFC Records, headed by Warner Brothers honcho Ray Caviano, considered one of the leaders among disco entrepeneurs. According to Soccio, he was discovered by Caviano while the latter was with another record company. "He gave me his word that in six months he'd start his own label and I'd be on it. I just sat back and waited. I didn't worry because people like Caviano are very different from the regular record man. He is totally committed to one kind of music."

The album was released last February at a party at Studio 54 in New York and it's taken off around the disco globe, already selling a million copies. The success has presented all sorts of opportunities to Soccio. He turned down an offer to produce the veteran soul group the Four Tops, but accepted the task of writing the music for a Warners film starring Diana Ross and Ryan O'Neal.

This week he was in his favorite place, a recording studio in a converted old neighborhood cinema in Point St. Charles. Soccio and Juno-award winning engineer Paul Page sat behind a console that looked like something out of *Battleship Galactica*.

"I like to work 36 hours straight or until exhaustion. Then I'll sleep for a day and go back again. That's how I keep my momentum. When you hear something over and over again you begin to think of new possibilities you can't hear the first time.

"Sure, there's bad disco, a lot of anonymous productions backing some female singers. I want to elevate the producer to the role of the artist.

Soccio's future is as set as a disco thump.

"The first album is selling so well that RFC doesn't need the next one until November, so I'll just take my time." He's been commuting to Nashville to produce some string arrangements but meanwhile Montreal is still home.

Jim Zeller: A cut above rock's groove

Jim Zeller, who is probably Montreal's best rock harmonica player, begins his act at the Hotel Iroquois with a sly, sublime version of *Theme from the Pink Panther*, immediately establishing his adeptness and range of expression on an instrument that's been mangled with hordes of hookers.

Although Zeller can rock with the best, he has a considerably more melodic style than the glut of young blues-rock harp wailers. Unfortunately, his talents are largely hidden because he spends as much energy singing and romping about the stage than concentrating on his real forte.

Not that Zeller has a bad voice. Indeed, compared to the usual overeager young rock shouters, Zeller's clear, purposeful voice is quite a pleasant surprise. However, he's not nearly the natural he is on harp. This points up his bi dilemma as a performing artist. Harmonica players are not exactly big stars.

Thus, Zeller divides his time between spitting out his words, blowing a few harmonica solos and shaking his body intensely while the band plays. Clearly, there's too much of a load on him. During much of his set he seems like a baffling, puffing performer trying to touch all bases, yet not focusing on one.

He is, however, brimming with personality and is a natural stage performer. Wearing a shiny neo-disco sailor top and a large leather belt carrying his array of harmonicas, he's able to look an audience straight in the eye with a demonic flair.

A harmonizing voice would give his songs more backbone and definition, when he performed with singer-songwriter Alan Gerber, the latter's vocals overran the show. It seems Zeller has a difficult time striking a balance.

Similarly, Zeller's harp does not clearly dominate the competent rock band's energetic sound. His solos are too short, rarely able to build up steam. His best shots arrive in the occasional moments of balladry, in which Zeller plays chromatic style, the sweet notes sliding wistfully over the melody.

Zeller is still a growing artist so this show should be viewed as part of the progress he's made with his first solo album, *Cartes sur table*. It leaves no doubt that he is one of the city's most promising stage performers and musicians — but it's a reminder he has a way to go.

— *Juan Rodriguez*

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